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AUTHOR Maynor, Natalie
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ABSTRACT

One way to alleviate the hostile feelings of students whose dialects or idiolects interfere with their writing of Edited American English is to spend class time studying the differences between written and spoken English and examining the reasons such differences exist. The concept of a "grapholect," a national written language used by speakers of various dialects, may be useful in explaining to students that certain features of their dialects need to be changed in writing. Many students try to write exactly as they speak, an indication that they have failed to move away from a context-dependent style in both speaking and writing, a style that leads to lack of clarity and inability to deal with the abstract. Classroom emphasis on defining the audience of a composition helps alleviate this difficulty. Another problem resulting from a confusion of written and spoken language appears when students realize there are differences between written and spoken language but do not understand what those differences are. For example, when handbooks use labels like "informal" to refer to forms acceptable in speech, students get the impression that speech is always informal and writing always formal. Instructors can help students recognize that levels of formality exist in both speech and writing by examining illustrative passages of spoken and written English in classes. An example would be to play tape recordings of casual conversation, then show samples of written work by the same people. (RL)

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Natalie Maynor
Department of English
Mississippi State University

Dialectal Interference and Attitudes in Composition

Students whose dialects or idiolects interfere with their writing of Edited American English often feel hostile toward composition courses and composition teachers. Through the years these students have been "put down" for using the language of their parents and peers. One way to alleviate these hostile feelings is to spend class time studying the differences between written and spoken English and examining the reasons that such differences exist.

Two kinds of problems often occur as a result of students' misunderstandings of the differences between written and spoken English. The first problem is that of the student who writes exactly as he or she speaks. The seriousness of this problem depends, of course, on the nature of the writing assignment and upon the speech style of the student.

One of the most obvious differences between conversation and writing is that the context allows the speaker in conversation to assume certain knowledge on the part of the listener. Research has shown, moreover, that, in general, mothers of lower socio-economic levels teach their children in a more context-dependent style than do mothers of higher socio-economic levels. Hess and Shipman, for instance, observed 160 American mothers from four socio-economic levels teaching their four-year-olds a color sorting task. A middle-classed mother gave the following instructions:

> The things that are all the same color you put in one section, in the second you put another group of colors, and in the third section you put the last group of colors.

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A lower-classed mother said:

> All right, just put them right here; put the other one right here; all right, put the other one here.

In other words, the lower-classed mother is relying upon physical demonstration. As Patricia Greenfield has pointed out, such "situation-embedded communication" not only fails to meet the informational needs of the child but also teaches the child to use context-dependent communication techniques, in other words, to be limited to the use of the "restricted" code as defined by Basil Bernstein.

Bernstein has cited a similar experiment constructed by Peter Hawkins, Assistant Research Officer in the Sociological Research Unit of University of London Institute of Education. He showed middle-classed and working-classed five-year-old children a series of four pictures which told a story and then asked the children to tell the story. In the first picture some boys were playing football; in the second, the ball goes through a window; in the third a woman is looking out of the window and a man is making an ominous gesture; and in the fourth the children are moving away. The first story, told by a middle-classed child, is as follows:

> Three boys are playing football and one boy kicks the ball and it goes through the window. The ball breaks the window and the boys are looking at it and a man comes out and shouts at them because they've broken the windows so they run away and then that lady looks out of her window and she tells the boys off.

As told by a lower-classed child, the story goes:

> They're playing football and he kicks it and it goes through there. It breaks the window and they're looking at it and he comes out and shouts at them because they've broken it so they run away and then she looks out and she tells them off.

So how does all this relate to college-level writing? It suggests, I believe, that one of the problems facing some students is failure to have

moved away from a context-dependent style in both speaking and writing, thus leading to lack of clarity and to inability to deal with the abstract.

Emphasis on defining the audience for a composition should help alleviate this problem to a certain extent. Although every user of language has mastered the technique of shifting tone and style of speaking to meet the decorum of the moment, this mastery has in most cases been unconscious. Discussion of such shifts should enable students to realize the importance of a clearly defined audience for a particular composition. And, of course, the usual work on clarity should also help the context-dependent writer. Peer evaluation of papers might be helpful in assessing clarity, whether done as a group project or on a one-to-one basis. A slightly different type of peer evaluation might be achieved by having the students write instructions for finding an obscure place on campus or a certain item in the library or in another room. The students could then exchange these instructions and test each other's clarity.

Another problem resulting from students writing the way they talk is more closely related to my title, "Dialectal Interference and Attitudes in Composition." Here we face the old challenge of resolving the conflict between so-called Edited American English and the various dialects that exist in our pluralistic society. Although every linguist and, ideally, every teacher of composition realizes that no dialect is superior to any other dialect, the fact remains that there is a standard Edited English in this country. The philosophy of a student's right to his or her own language is fine, but how many doctoral dissertations, government reports, or business correspondences will be accepted with plurals or tense forms that follow morphological systems different from the one of the reader? Perhaps today's accepted standard is not the best one. The <u>ed</u> on <u>reminded</u> IS redundant in a sentence like "He reminded me yesterday." Nevertheless, I feel that it would be a grave disservice to my freshman who

hopes to enter Harvard Law School, or, for that matter, to my freshman who hopes to pass the essay portion of her history exam, if I did not point out that "He remind me yesterday," while perfectly clear and acceptable when communicating with those who share this morphological system, is a violation of the code which has come to be called Edited American English.

The concept of a grapholect, as discussed by Haugen, Hirsch, and others, is perhaps a useful one in explaining to students that certain features of their dialects need to be changed in writing. A grapholect is a national written language, used by speakers of various dialects. Although some speakers of minority dialects may realize that the American grapholect is more similar to some dialects (that of their teachers for instance) than it is to their own, the idea of a national written language is less offensive and threatening to minority students than the idea of "MY (the teacher's) dialect is the one you've got to use." If students are introduced to essays written by known speakers of various dialects, they should be able to see that an American grapholect does in fact exist. And a good teacher should be able, as Hirsch has pointed out, to convince students that a grapholect is a "classless, trans-dialectal instrument for communication between social and regional groups." Hirsch goes on to say:

> To this may be added the benefit of communicating with the dead and the yet unborn. When a child of ten can read, with at least verbal comprehension, Gulliver's Travels, a book over two hundred years old, the conservative and normative power of the grapholect transcends class, time, and place. The teacher of literacy provides students with an instrument of communicability on a national and even international scale. All the great international grapholects break down barriers between social and regional groups. Just as writing itself was an invention which overcame space and time, so the advent of mass literacy is a modern innovation which has the potential, among other things, to reduce the isolation and subjugation of every individual and

> group. Without a normative grapholect, a classless society could not be plausibly imagined.

After selling the concept of a grapholect, the challenge is to teach this grapholect. Once again, the reasons behind some of the differences between written and spoken English become useful. For instance, fragmentation is acceptable in speech because clarity is usually ensured by the context and because a listener can ask questions to clear up ambiguities. And punctuation is a useful substitute in writing for the vocal nuances of speech. Use of so-called "correct," meaning conforming, tense forms, case, number, and so forth, can be taught with less student resistance if the students realize that they are acquiring skills in a grapholect, not unlike learning another language, and if they are made to understand that their own dialects may be just as "correct" or appropriate in certain conversational situations as this grapholect is for writing.

At the beginning I mentioned that there are two kinds of problems resulting from a confusion of written and spoken language. So far I have been addressing the problems of those students who write just as they talk. The other kind of problem sometimes appears when a student realizes that there are differences between written and spoken English but does not understand what those differences are. This misunderstanding may result in flowery, stilted, or awkward prose.

Handbooks that use labels like "informal" to refer to forms acceptable in speech compound the students' misunderstanding. Such labels give the impression that speech is always informal and writing formal. A look at Kenyon's old but still valid essay, "Cultural Levels and Functional Varieties of English," should be helpful for students, teachers, and handbook writers. Although most people today would take issue with Kenyon's use of the label

"substandard," the point he makes is a good one. Substituting the term "non-standard" for his "substandard," with the understanding that "non-standard" simply means non-conforming, we can consider again Kenyon's thesis that people frequently confuse the two categories, cultural levels, (i.e., standard and non-standard) and functional varieties (i.e., familiar and formal).

Once again, an examination of the differences between speaking and writing should help students move away from the idea that writing is simply more formal or literary. Some of the most obvious differences are redundancy in speech, helpful to a listener but annoying to a reader; fragmentation, intelligible to a listener, confusing to a reader; excessive coordination, not noticed by a listener, tedious to a reader; false starts, a result of spontaneity in speech, an undesirable quality in writing; and, of course, the added mechanics of writing, like punctuation and spelling.

Students may be made to recognize that levels of formality exist in both speech and writing by examining illustrative passages of spoken and written English. An interesting method of examining differences between spoken and written English involves the use of a tape recorder. The instructor may be able to play tapes of casual conversation and then show samples of written work by the same people. (I attempted this once by taping conversation of some of my colleagues at a party, with the intention of playing the tape for my students and then showing them some of the scholarly publications of the same people. But I had to abandon the plan when I realized the extent of the deletions I would have to make from the tapes, for the sake of propriety.) Another activity might be to have students collect samples of spoken English on tape and then compare these samples with written English or transcribe the samples into writing and note the confusing style of speech taken away from its context.

Hirsch, in The Philosophy of Composition, uses the Nixon tapes as illustration in making his point that "Anyone who reads a transcript of a conversation recorded by a hidden microphone will experience difficulty in grasping what the participants are effortlessly understanding." He points out that the transcripts of the Nixon tapes are often totally unintelligible "not only in nuance of implication but in plain sense." Hearing the tapes helps clarify some of the unintelligible portions of the transcripts, indicating apparently that "intonation and timing provided essential clues that were lacking on the page." But even listening to the tapes is not totally satisfactory without having specific information about "the historical situation within which each conversation took place."

If students are guided to an understanding of what the differences between written and spoken English are, of why these differences exist, and of the usefulness of achieving skill in the American grapholect, the teaching of effective composition should be easier. There will always be problems in exactly how to teach some students to write, but motivation is the first and most crucial step. It is much easier to help students who do not view their teacher as the enemy, out to malign their dialects and idiolects.

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